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The Finer Music and the Ass's Bray: Henry James versus American Culture

The vulgarity, ignorance, rabid vanity and general idiocy of them all [the American reviews of his Hawthorne] is truly incredible. . . . The whole episode projects a lurid light upon the state of American "culture." . . . Whatever might have been my own evidence for calling American taste "provincial," my successors at least will have no excuse for not doing it.

You say that literature is going down in the U.S.A. I quite agree with you—the stuff that is sent me seems to me written by eunuchs & sempstresses. . . . I suspect the age of letters is waning, for our time. . . . Art, form, may return, but I doubt that I shall live to see them. . . . All the same, I shall try to make them live a little longer!

(Letters from Henry James to Thomas Sergeant Perry, February 1880 and 1881, respectively.)¹

James thought the power to discriminate fine differences both the keystone of culture and the chief requirement for any successful reading of his novels. He felt American women, the body of readers chiefly responsible for the fortune of fiction writers, lacked this faculty because American men failed to "take a stand." They abjured their duty to exert "manly competence and control, example, expectation," James explains in articles on the speech and manners of American women that he contributed to *Harper's Bazar* in 1906-07.² Instead, American women have been flattered privately and publicly into thinking that they are "queens" who need neither correction nor improvement. Failing to appreciate fiction celebrating "form" and delicacy, they prefer the vulgar and shoddy over the real, right thing. Hence they neglect the serious work of writers such as James, bestowing their tribute instead on mediocre productions. This debasement resulted, James thought, from the increasing feminization of American culture. In his articles, as in the Prefaces to his novels written at about the same time, James argues that an intimate connection exists

between the care given to common speech and manners in a culture and its literary taste. The severity of his criticism of American women betrays the outraged dignity of a neglected author.

Some thirty-five years before he delivered his address on the question of our speech at Bryn Mawr (1905) and conceived the *Harper's Bazar* articles, James wrote a story, entitled "Travelling Companions" (1870), which touches on one of our subjects, though with a provocative difference. Knowing the value James placed on discriminating difference, it may prove valuable to glance at this nuance. In "Travelling Companions" the only fault the hero Mr. Brooke finds with the heroine, Charlotte Evans, is her voice: "In her voice alone the charm faltered. It was high, thin, and nervous." In other respects—character and mind—she was more than an estimable representative of the charm of American women, of "the far-famed graces of their frankness and freedom."³ He draws no connection between Miss Evans' want of a proper tone and any corresponding want of judgment and taste, or between this defect and any incipient danger in her frankness and freedom. Indeed Miss Evans has wit enough to instruct the hero in appreciating the manifold real: "Mr. Brooke . . . we ought to learn from all this to be *real*: real even as Giotto is real; to discriminate between genuine and factitious sentiment: between the substantial and the trivial; between the essential and the superfluous; sentiment and sentimentality."⁴ Mr. Brooke responds breathlessly: "You speak . . . with appalling wisdom and truth."

The social virtues James so admires in Charlotte Evans and American women generally in 1870 are transformed into grave vices by 1906-07, contributing to "the universal stupor" of American culture (77). The "general large ease" of American women becomes in so many directions their "general large looseness"; their frankness descends to bold egotistical regard of "themselves almost explicitly as the only objects of interest" (77); their freedom degenerates into complacent disregard of discipline and authority (76); their failure to speak properly devolves into bleating the least distinct vocables necessary for minimum intelligibility. James claims that the American woman mumbles, grunts, slobbers, and much worse besides. Her failure to discriminate between sounds, such as "new" and "noo," he argues, lies at the root of American *un*-civilization and contributes to her failure to discriminate all values in language, including those of fiction, so necessary for the vivification and appreciation of life and art. To see how James conceives and unfolds these far-reaching connections and what they fundamentally mean for him, helps us to approach the center of private feeling expressed, sometimes vindictively, in these essays.⁵ Although he promises a free inquiry into the problem, James

confesses, more accurately, that he stands before the case “with a sense of cause within cause and depth below depth; I look into it, deep down, as into the obscure, the abysmal” (21-22). While letting light into this “huge dimness,” he betrays the deep personal cause moving him against the American woman.

James’s hostility toward American culture, particularly its response to his works, clearly emerged in the 1880s, as the two letters to his friend Thomas Perry quoted in the epigraphs indicate. For James, as for his fictional author Mark Ambient in “The Author of *Beltraffio*” (1884), there existed a “passion for form”; to both of them a stylistic blemish was the “the highest social offense.”⁶ Were it the capital crime it ought to be. Ambient says, “we shouldn’t be deluged by this flood of rubbish” in fiction. Like James, Mark Ambient was not a popular writer; and “he very seldom talked about the newspapers—which, by the way, were always very stupid in regard to the author of *Beltraffio*.”⁷ In the year this story appeared, James, vexed and defensive, turned on all fronts to counterattack his public, which rejected him while extravagantly honoring others so much his inferior. “The Art of Fiction,” one of his most important artistic manifestoes, answers many of his critics, as in it James raises the question of literary taste and its abuse. Early in the year James also wrote to W. D. Howells expressing his exasperation over the taste of the American fiction-reading public apropos a recent novelistic success by one of the vulgar tribe:

What you tell me of the success of Crawford’s last novel sickens and almost paralyses me. It seems to me (the book) so contemptibly bad and ignoble that the idea of people reading it in such numbers makes one return upon one’s self and ask *what is the use of trying to write anything decent or serious for a public so absolutely idiotic*. It must be totally wasted. I would rather have produced the basest experiment in the “naturalistic” that is being practised here [Paris] than such a piece of sixpenny humbug. Work so shamelessly bad seems to me to dishonour the novelist’s art to a degree that is absolutely not to be forgiven; just as its success dishonours the people for whom one supposes one’s self to write. Excuse my ferocity, which (more discreetly and philosophically) I think you must share; and don’t mention it, please, to any one, as it will be set down to green-eyed jealousy.⁸

Several works by Frances Hodgson Burnett, James’s particular *bête noire*, had also recently appeared. In a letter to Perry from Washington, D.C. in 1882, James observes that “one is far from Trgff [Turgenev] and from Flaubert here. . . . There is no literature—save Mrs. Hodgson Burnett’s; which I can’t read.”⁹ In the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 24 October 1883, James had anonymously reviewed Burnett’s play *Young Folks’ Ways*, adapted from her novella *Esmeralda* (1881).¹⁰ His review contains some of the complaints he raised against the speech

and manners of American women two decades later. The play is, James maintains, so primitive, mawkish, unreal that "it would be interesting to attempt to ascertain what level of taste . . . the prosperity of such a piece would give us the right to imagine." Although the actors managed to extract a good deal of "inexpensive" comedy from the work, the undertaking, James concluded, proved fruitless and absurd.

"Inexpensive" is of interest, since James, in the *Harper's Bazar* essays, employs the same sentiment to characterize "tin shilling" novels and the same word to characterize the American feminine "plant," which has been so "inexpensively grown" (19). The novels betray a "sordid cheapness" because so little craft and care entered into their composition, and the American woman is inexpensively grown because, compared with her European counterpart, so little trouble has been taken with her cultivation (20). James held that in both cases the soil which should have nourished had undergone no very special preparation. In writing, James spared nothing in the trouble *he* took, the effort *he* made in the service of art. His was no inexpensive article, however slight his remuneration.

Perhaps the most important event in 1884 that touches on our subject was the composition of *The Bostonians*, a work finished and serialized in *Century Magazine* the following year. Although James had great expectations for this novel, it proved a worse failure with the public than any of his major works to date.¹¹ *The Bostonians* appeared as a book in 1886, the same year Burnett published *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, a novel which, along with its stage version, brought her a very large fortune. Lack of success would cloud the career of *The Bostonians* many years later as well. In a letter to Edmund Gosse in 1915, James, explaining the ill-starred fortune of the New York Edition of his works, gave the reasons for excluding *The Bostonians*, which Gosse had praised: "the undertaking had begun to announce itself as a virtual failure, and we stopped short where we were—that is when a couple of dozen volumes were out. . . . But such is 'success'! I should have liked to write that Preface to *The Bostonians*—which will never be written now. But think of noting now that *that* is a thing that has perished!"¹² This novel played an exceptionally complicated role in the early history of James's career, and, like "The Art of Fiction" and "The Author of *Beltraffio*," it is instinct with many of the same cultural-literary concerns that later informed the *Harper's Bazar* essays. For this reason, we may say, that those essays provide us with a kind of Preface to *The Bostonians*, so well do their sentiments chime with the novel's.

In the novel James expresses, through the hero Basil Ransom, his reaction to the feminization of American life and endorses the idea

that the responsibility for controlling and guiding the insensible female belongs to the men. Ransom redeems Verena Tarrant from her feminist enterprise after denouncing it as part of "an age of unspeakable shams."¹³ Reactionary as his ideas appear to be, James in spirit identifies with them, though saying this does not mean that James sides with Ransom's desire to have Verena dance on a table for his amusement.¹⁴ When asked what he would save his own sex from, Ransom proclaims, in language resembling James's in the *Harper's* essays,

From the most damnable feminization! I am so far from thinking as you [Verena] set forth the other night, that there is not enough woman in our general life, that it has long been pressed home to me that there is a great deal too much. The whole generation is womanized; *the masculine tone is passing out of the world*; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, *will usher in the reign of mediocrity*, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover. . . . (B, 343)

Although James at times distances himself from his hero by satirizing some of his views, the program for male domination realized in *The Bostonians* can be clearly traced in the later essays. At their conclusion James offers a solution to the feminization of American culture by calling on American men to assume their cultural responsibility. After all, he notes, "the wisdom of the ages has everywhere quite absolved her [the woman] from the formidable care of extracting a conception of the universe and a scheme of manners from her moral consciousness alone" (92). James implores the American male to correct the women by taking, as Ransom does, "his stand on what pleases him" (91). In defending this position James refers to "societies other than ours," in which "the male privilege of correction springs, and quite logically, from the social fact that the male is the member of society primarily acting and administering and primarily listened to—whereby his education, his speech, his tone, his standards and connections, his general 'competence,' as I have called it, color the whole air, react upon his companion and establish for her the principal relation she recognizes" (91-92).

Although James says that the leading periodicals would probably find Ransom's notions narrow, as do feminists like Olive Chancellor, we can hardly doubt that he believes it belongs primarily to the masculine character to look clearly upon reality and, accordingly, to guide the blinder, frailer sex toward civilization. The "higher fatuity"

(91) and the "sweet simplicity" (93) of American women had to be corrected, James insisted, by the men, who possess "the manly part of *real* appreciation" (91) and can show her "a world the very interest of which is exactly that it is complicated" (93)—interesting and subtle and complicated like a Jamesian novel. Reform depends on taking direct action "against her much-misguided self" (90), or, as Ransom says, against there being "a great deal too much" of woman "in our general life." In his essays James concludes that the woman "is never at all thoroughly a well-bred person unless *he* [the man] has begun by having a sense for it and by showing her the way" (92). She has only to take the "truth as revealed to her" (92) and submit to his guiding competence and authority. Only then can American civilization come into possession of an "awakened consciousness"—above that of a "ruminant animal" (70)—which alone will inform us of "where we are" (44).

We may say of James of the essays what he says of Ransom in *The Bostonians*, both of whom were "very suspicious of the encroachments of modern democracy":

[H]e was much addicted to judging his age. He thought it talkative, querulous, hysterical, maudlin, full of false ideas, of unhealthy germs, of extravagant, dissipated habits, for which a great reckoning was in store. (B, 194)

Like Ransom, James may also be said to be "as willing to let women off easily in the particular case as he was fixed in the belief that the sex in general requires watching" (B, 216). Readers of the articles may recall that James felt that American journalism—"the great agency of [the American woman's] fame"—took just the opposite position, sometimes maltreating her in particular cases, but giving her in general an indiscriminately flattering publicity (15). This publicity prepared her for her fate, and he now saw her destiny being accomplished,

to the joy of the ironic gods—who have locked you up, as an infatuated, innumerable body, a warning to the rest of the race, in perhaps the very best-appointed of all the fools paradises they have ever insidiously prepared for humanity." (48)

James perseveres in the *Harper's Bazar* articles in his "manly" duty, as he saw it, of correcting the American woman. He claims they possess no notion of "superior" things (17), and "practically . . . no taste at all" (21) because they belong to a simple world without cultural density, one too primitive to make any demands upon them, especially the kinds of demands a Jamesian novel makes on its reader. Reacting to their fearlessness and their being treated on all sides to exemptions

and immunities, he insisted that farm animals achieve a higher standard in communication, for they at least "low and bleat and bray with a certain consistency and harmony" (21). Subject to no criticism or control, the American woman's taste in all things simply runs wild.

We must not confuse James's view of American women in general with the image of the Europeanized American heroine he celebrates in such novels, early and late, as *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*. We might describe James's ambivalence as a conflict between what he wanted the American woman to be and what he thought all too many of them were. If we ask what intervened between 1870 and 1905 to modify James's attitude toward American women, we must conclude that it was the fate his own works suffered both at their hands and in the American press. In her book of reminiscences, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton speaks of James's sensitivity to criticism, caused, she believed, "by the great artist's deep consciousness of his powers, combined with a bitter, a lifelong disappointment at his lack of popular recognition. . . . [He] certainly suffered all his life—and more and more as time went on—from the lack of recognition. . . ."15 And in a review of Percy Lubbock's edition of James's letters on which he was working just before his death in 1920, William Dean Howells writes of America's unkindness to James, remarking that "the nearest of his friends in Boston would say they liked him, but they could not bear his fiction; and from the people, conscious of culture, throughout New England, especially from the women, he had sometimes outright insult."16 In his *Harper's* essay, James returns the insult.

For obvious reasons James did not wish to make too obvious the real cause of his complaint; he would not stoop to say explicitly just what had most offended him. Once on the offense, however, he did not lack skill of speech required for an effective attack. The central issue shapes itself on the first page of the first article. There James reacts almost contemptuously to the commonplace that American women are "a great success in the world," a success issuing from the publicity of American journalism's "brazen voice." She enjoys her remarkable fortune as a result of fewer discriminations from Mrs. Brown to Mrs. Smith . . . than her sisters elsewhere under the sun." Thus, ironically, he envisioned the American woman as being celebrated, despite her want of discrimination, of discipline, of judgment, by a press suffering the same deficiencies. She owes her success to democracy and to the "unequalled potency of advertisement" (36). In a letter to Howells in 1902, James complained that "the *faculty of attention* has utterly vanished from the general anglo-saxon mind, extinguished at its source by the big blatant *Bayadère* of Journalism, of the newspaper

and the *picture* (above all) magazine. . . . [T]he prose that is careful to be in the tone of, and with the distinction of, a newspaper or bill-poster advertisement—these and these only, meseems, ‘stand a chance.’ But why do I talk of such chances?”¹⁷ Certainly the prose and tone of a newspaper had little in common with James’s subtle fiction and could offer but poor preparation for its popular reception. Until now American women have been almost universally free from criticism. James intends to illuminate, with the searching light of criticism, what he interpreted as the audacity in their fearlessness, the sham of their success, the actuality of their “barbarism,” and, not least, their inability to select fiction of a civilized order. All these defects proceed from delinquencies in speech, “the common colloquial act” lying at the foundation of all other acts of communication (28).

The “interest” of everything pertaining to civilized articulation depends on our making, James explains, an “effort of differentiation” (40). Discriminating between simple sounds while speaking or listening does not make “for servitude,” and thus become an infringement on their freedom, as American women suppose, “but for interest” (40). And on such interest depends our “keeping up the sense of life instead of letting it drop” (42). We have the choice of sustaining “the integrity of our syllables,” of respecting their division into parts, or of going in “only for large, loose, easy . . . wholes. That is the character arrived at by the moo of the cow, the bray of the ass, and the bark of the dog” (42). The question of fiction, which James slyly eases into, always stands behind these concerns. We can resist the “rising tide of barbarism” (38) only by exercising right choice in all matters of communication:

For everything hangs together, and there are certain perceptions and sensibilities that are a key—a key to the inner treasury of consciousness, where all sorts of priceless things abide. Access to these is through those perceptions; so don’t hope that you can just rudely and crudely force the lock. Everything hangs together, I say, and there’s no isolated question of speech, no isolated application of taste, no isolated damnation of delicacy. (44; my emphasis, except for “key”)

Just prior to this eloquent appreciation of “connections,” the question of selecting fiction explicitly arises. James’s imagined interlocutress introduces the subject closest to his heart: “Yes, in the novel it *is* syllabled, it *is* spelled out. The ‘parts’, as you call them, *are* retained” (43). James replies:

Depend upon it, dear young lady, these parts are there, theoretically, *all* sounded. The integrity of romance requires them without exception. *And what are novels but the lesson of life?* The retention of the conve-nanted parts is their absolute basis, without which they wouldn’t for a

moment hang together. The coherency of speech is the narrow end of the wedge they insert into our consciousness: the rest of their appeal comes only *after* that. They so take for granted, therefore, and they by the same stroke consecrate, what I call the interest. This isn't and can never be, in the effect of a sordid cheapness, the effect of our offering tin shillings for silver ones. (43)

In James's view the American woman has little sensitivity for the word, the "narrow end of the wedge," by means of which the novelist makes his appeal; she is, rather, "the unhappy being whose sensibility has lost an edge, who has parted with an intimate perception, and to whom thereby half of life is closed" (43). American women have bestowed their garland principally upon authors of the sordid, vulgar, sentimental tin shilling article and thereby have proven themselves "poor, mean and stupid creatures" (43).

In his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, written at about the same time as the essays, James remarks that as a writer he felt "under a special obligation to be amusing," never to lapse into " 'thinness,'" always to cultivate "the lively."¹⁸ His address to American women asks them not to leave aside everything that "ought to make our medium [of speech] amusing," and

by amusing I don't mean grotesque. I use the term in that higher, that charmingly modern sense that represents the something more than merely "answering," mere sufficing to its ordinary function, that we ask of almost any implement we employ. (43)

Certainly, "the shades of our articulation are among the most precious of our familiar tools" (44). Through cultivating this amusement, we can achieve consciousness—the conscious connection with life—since, as James said in his Bryn Mawr address in 1905, "imparting of a coherent culture is a matter of communication and responses."¹⁹ But of consciousness, of feeling, as of articulation, there are innumerable shades and degrees, James explains in another of his Prefaces, degrees from "the muffled, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent" to "the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible" (P, 62). Only those "moved in this latter fashion . . . 'get most' out of all that happens to them and . . . in so doing enable us, as readers of their record, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most" (P, 62). In his novels, this ideal guided James in shaping a center of consciousness "capable of feeling in the given case more than another of what is felt for it, . . . the only sort of person on whom we can count not to betray, to cheapen or, as we say, give away, the value and beauty of the thing" (P, 67). Thus, at so many points, do the ideas and feelings James expresses in the essays correspond to

those he intimately associated with his own art of fiction analyzed in the Prefaces. Attention to speech holds the deepest lesson of life: capable "of nothing but splendid waste" (P, 120), life is "all inclusion and confusion"; the act of "discrimination and selection," the source of *interest*, rests with human beings, each of whom was an artist in each of his colloquial acts. Only when we attend to common speech in this way can we receive the novelist's subtler secrets of complex perceptions. Appreciation, to *be* appreciation, implies, of course, some such "rudimentary zeal" (P, 227).

An inevitable connection obtains, then, between the most common and humble habit of speech and our ability to appreciate fiction of the silver rather than "tin shilling" sort. Quality fiction has little chance so long as speech remains an insensible bray that makes "for the confused, the ugly, the flat, the thin, the mean, the helpless, that reduce[s] articulation to an easy and ignoble minimum, and so keep[s] it as little distinct as possible from the grunting . . . of animals."²⁰ Reducing vocables to the minimum "rude semblance" necessary for intelligibility makes inevitable the selection of "cheap innutritive" novels (45), since "everything that makes in us against a gross monotony [is] put on a starvation diet" (43). However erroneously, he nonetheless colorfully contested that we owe our deplorable "inarticulate state" to the American woman, who, placed above and beyond criticism, has been left to "slobber unchecked" (38). "Critical control," on which the promotion of good fiction depends, has been baffled (36)—certainly it finds no place in our "strident newspapers" that have "guarded and protected, almost cherished" every sign of cultural abuse (37).

As James saw the case, the speech and manners of American women—those happy children of nature, quite opposed to "every critical measure" (52)—remain utterly untouched by any question "of the 'formed,' or even of the formable." And *form*, we know, was James's critical by-word. The American woman, "shouting, flouncing, romping, uproariously jesting" (52) or squealing, or barking, or roaring, all "slipshod and slobbery" (29), could hardly be expected to appreciate James's special art of fiction. Since *for* her, "anything that would sufficiently stand for the word, and that might thereby be uttered with the minimum of articulation, would sufficiently do" (41), then *from* her "the superstition of vain forms and superfluous efforts, receive[s] its quietus" (41). What chance of success, James felt, could he hope from such a "tongueless" tribe? Since "the faculty of attention has utterly vanished" and "the literary sense is a distinctly waning quality," James well asked Howells why he should talk at all of his "chances."

The American woman's lack of discrimination in choosing her fiction proved especially irritating to James because the defect at once so little interfered with her own far-flung fame and general success and so greatly contributed to his want, relatively speaking, of both. He was deprived of the fame and fortune so easily won by novelists whose products were as undifferentiated and ignoble as an ass's bray, catering to the very taste he despised. In *The Bostonians*, Verena triumphs by the same easy means that the strident and indiscriminate press generally put at the service of American women, while Ransom, an unpopular and reactionary writer, openly decries her fame and fortune. Ransom's one-man crusade against what he calls the "damnable feminization" of American public life corresponds with James's crusade against the feminization of the cultural domain specifically touching language and literature. Ransom complains that he found it difficult to publish and be heard because "editors are to a man, a timorous lot, always saying they want something original, but deadly afraid of it when it comes" (B, 342). The curious reader might wonder whether, after soliciting James's essays, the editors of *Harper's Bazar* did not feel that they had gotten more of the original and the reactionary than they bargained for; and further, whether their gentle readers, suddenly finding themselves no longer protected with immunities and exemptions, grew for the first time "afraid."

The essays constitute, unquestionably, a rather stiff dosage of the kind of criticism James thought overdue. He, for one, felt he was doing his manly duty, as he saw it, of controlling American women and guiding them to the promised land. Only by men taking charge, he insisted, might the American woman's "consciousness [be] roused and [her] intelligence schooled" and "the acquisition and application of acuteness" be looked for (24). Only then might she be said really to have tasted of the tree of knowledge and become prepared for "the finer music" harmonized in such novels as his own (95), works that above all others embodied the largest "number of discriminations, of tonic differences" (41).²¹

NOTES

1. Virginia Harlow, *Thomas Sargeant Perry* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1950), pp. 305-306, 309-310.
2. Henry James, *The Speech and Manners of American Women*, ed. E. S. Riggs (Lancaster, Pa.: Lancaster House Press, 1973), p. 91. All future page references to this text will appear in parentheses. James's essays originally appeared in eight numbers of *Harper's Bazar*, XL and XLI, November 1906 to July 1907.
3. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), II, 178.

4. *Tales*, II, 210-11.
5. William Dean Howells was among those who contributed articles to *Harper's Bazar* on the speech and manners of American women, and his brief piece, "Our Daily Speech" (XL, Oct. 1906, 930-34), markedly contrasts in tone and attitude with James's. Whereas James is, though not without humor, sternly serious, Howells is facetious, paternally ironic, and gently condescending.
6. *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1963), V, 333.
7. *Tales*, V, 331.
8. Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), III, 27 (21 February 1884); my emphasis.
9. Harlow, *T. S. Perry*, p. 311.
10. "A Poor Play Well Acted," in Henry James, *The Scenic Art: Notes on Acting and the Drama: 1872-1901*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 192-97. Some critics, while damning James, lauded Burnett as one of the most promising American novelists of the day. Particularly grating must have been the review (*Quarterly Review*, CLV, Jan., 1883) which praises Burnett's (all slipshod and slobbery) novel *Louisiana* and heaps scorn on James. James read Burnett's *Fair Barbarian* (1881) closely enough to have derived much of his material for "The Siege of London" (1883) from it. The tale is an utterly Jamesian remake of a typical—that is, vulgarly sentimental—Burnett story.
11. After *The Bostonians* appeared in serial, James wrote to his brother about his fears it had "fallen flat": "I hoped much of it and shall be disappointed—having got no money for it. I hoped for a little glory" (quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* [New York: Knopf, 1947], p. 327). This novel was quickly succeeded by *The Princess Casamassima* (in the *Atlantic Monthly*), which James hoped would "appear more 'popular'." It did little better than had its predecessor, which prompted James to complain to Howells of having "entered upon evil days": the two novels, "from which I expected so much and derived so little. . . . have reduced the desire, and the demand, for my productions to zero." James concludes that "with the imbecility of babyish critics the serious writer need absolutely not concern himself. . . . I even confess that since the *Bostonians*, I find myself holding the 'critical world' at large in a singular contempt. I go so far as to think that the literary sense is a distinctly waning quality" (*Letters*, I, 135, 136; 2 Jan. 1888).
12. Lubbock, ed., *The Letters of Henry James* (New York: Scribners, 1920), II, 498-99 (25 Aug. 1915).
13. *The Bostonians* (New York: The Modern Library, 1956), p. 344. All future references to this novel will be included in parentheses with a "B" preceding the page number.
14. The close connection between Ransom and James and its relationship with the subject of women shining in the limelight is revealed in a rather curious manner late in *The Bostonians*. Ransom returns to his courtship of Verena with fresh ardor after the conservative "Rational Review" accepts one of his articles for publication. In telling her of it, however, he depreciates his minor success when compared with hers as a public speaker, but the metaphoric use of the verb "publish" possibly suggest James's preoccupation with successful woman writers. Ransom says, "At any rate, the simple fact that it is to be published makes an era in my life. This will seem pitiful to you, no doubt, who publish yourself, have been before the world these several years, and are flushed with every kind of triumph. . . ." (B, 380). So completely do Ransom's and James's views correspond that the reader may find it difficult at first glance to say which of the following sentiments come from *The Bostonians* and which from the *Harper's Bazar* essays:

[She lacks any] spark of the guiding reason that separates audacity from madness.

Isn't it everywhere written that the women, in any society, are what the men make them?

The sort of thing she was able to do, to say, was an article for which there was more and more demand—fluent, pretty, third-rate palaver, conscious or unconscious perfected humbug; the stupid, gregarious, gullible public . . . could swallow unlimited draughts of it.

[European] women are not nearly so charming as ours—or as ours would be if this modern pestilence were eradicated. . . . [W]omen are less and less sought in marriage; what a testimony that is to the pernicious effect on their manners, their person, their nature of this fatuous agitation.

(The *Harper's Bazar* essays: pp. 21, 27; *The Bostonians*: pp. 328, 345, respectively.)

15. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), pp. 191-92.

16. Mildred Howells, *Life and Letters of William Dean Howells* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), II, 396.
17. Lubbock, ed., *Letters*, I, 408. James saw the "horrific" newspaper as the American woman's favorite reading, which she grossly displayed in public everywhere. In the essays he takes a broadshot, positively Spenserian in character, at both: "it is not my concern here to attempt a sketch of the common, the ubiquitous newspaper face, with its mere monstrosity and deformity of feature and the vast open mouth, adjusted as to the chatter of Bedlam, that flings the flood-gates of vulgarity further back than anywhere else on earth; it speaks -- if we may talk of speaking -- for itself, and the evil case for it may dispense at this time of day, and after a single glance at the field, with presentation. What measure of social grace might you suppose yourself invited to attribute to a lady living contentedly in the daily air it exhaled? What would be the natural effect on articulation and utterance themselves -- so I found myself put the case -- of all the unashamed grossness and blatancy and illiteracy and impudence, what that of the perpetual vision of head-lines elongated as to the scream of the locomotive, what the consequence of such a scattering to the winds, as by the flight of a terrified nymph before riotous satyrs, of the precious saving salt of a felt proportion in things?" (69). In this attack James may be reacting to an essay W. D. Howells published in *Harper's Bazar* in 1902 (XXVI, 956-960) entitled "What Should Girls Read?" Howells endorses their reading newspapers because journalism as "contemporary history . . . forms the consciousness of civilization." He introduces this subject by explaining his initial shock at seeing a pretty girl reading a newspaper "in the Elevated train." On consideration Howells felt his shock was unjustified when he realized "that she was possibly employed as usefully and nobly as if she were reading a book, certainly the sort of book she might have chosen." The subject arises for James around a similar scene of seeing a lady reading a newspaper on a train, but for him the sight is "an evocation of chaos" (68) which he in no way mitigates.
18. Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. R. P. Blackmur (New York: Scribners, 1934), p. 57. Future references to the Prefaces will be in parentheses with a "P" preceding the page number.
19. Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech [and] The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905), p. 6.
20. *The Question of Our Speech*, p. 16.
21. I would like to acknowledge my general indebtedness in preparing this study to Roger Gard's useful selection of background materials on Henry James in *The Critical Heritage Series* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968). I agree with Gard's surmise that the reasons James turned from fiction to the stage in the first half of the 1890's was "in the hope, not only of money, but of a tangible response to his works" (p. 13). Disastrous results in the theatre hastened his return to fiction.